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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of emotion in 108 children from a small Northern California city aged 6-7, 8-9, and 10-11 years. The paper specifically examines: (1) children's beliefs about emotion management that contribute to their preinteraction expectancies; (2) the sorts of socializing messages children appear to be responding to; and (3) the kinds of cognitive representations that are available to children as they construct their naive theory of emotion. The children were individually asked a series of standardized questions about the parental reactions likely to occur when a child protagonist revealed his or her genuine emotion in eight hypothetical vignettes, and about what one could do to avoid or promote those parental reactions. Half the vignettes concerned someone who was at risk for having their feelings hurt by the protagonist's expression of genuine emotion; the other half were about a child protagonist who became vulnerable by displaying genuine emotion. The findings indicate that there were generally no age differences in children's expectations of how controlling or accepting a parent's reaction would be in both vignettes. Children selected relatively more controlling parental reactions when the protagonist's display of emotion could result in another person's becoming vulnerable or getting his or her feelings hurt. (RJC)

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Cognitive Capabilities Involved in the Socialization of Emotion: Development in Middle Childhood

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COGNITIVE CAPABILITIES INVOLVED IN THE SOCIALIZATION OF EMOTION: DEVELOPMENT IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

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My focus for some years now has been on children s understanding of how emotional-expressive behavior is used in interpersonal transactions. I will argue that children begin in middle childhood to reason systematically about social exchange from the standpoint of mutual influence, using emotional-expressive behavior as a source of particularly salient overt cues. Integrated with their attribution of meaning to the emotional-expressive cues are cognitive capabilities that I shall briefly consider. I also think that children's understanding of mutual influence is pivotal to the socialization of emotion, particularly so in middle childhood and preadolescence.

Allow me to elaborate what I mean by the notion of mutual influence. By middle childhood we find that children are well aware that others take into account one's emotional expressive behavior as social information. What I wanted to explore further was how children think such emotional-expressive behavior will affect their subsequent interaction and what options exist, for example, for averting negative outcomes or for promoting positive ones. In other words, in an on-going social transaction, a "dove-tailing" of both persons' emotional-expressive behavior occurs that regulates both emotion processes and relationship dynamics.

Social psychologists have examined this mutual expectation of influence in the relationship process; they have referred to two main types of expectancies that appear to guide this mutual influence: (a) reciprocity and (b) compensation (Ickes, Patterson, Rajecki, & Tanford, 1982). Reciprocity refers to similar expectancies about one another on the part of two people such that they display parallel interactive behaviors (e.g., approach-approach or avoidance-avoidance). Compensation refers to more complex anticipations of behavior, namely, one has preinteraction expectancies that suggest that the anticipated interaction will be negative for oneself, but one tries to modify one's behavior in such a manner so as to deflect in advance potential negative outcomes. An example would be smiling at a dominant person whose opinion of oneself one suspects may not be particularly favorable, yet one hopes that one's expressive gesture ameliorates negative feelings held toward oneself that might otherwise contribute to one's subsequent disadvantage. In other words, the "disarming smile" is premised on fairly subtle perspective-taking and expectancy manipulation.

Children appear to be making use of these two broad sorts of expectancies when they respond to interviews about the "dove-tailing" of emotional-expressive behavior in specific instances of social transaction. In order for them to do so, they must also be drawing upon a set of inter-related cognitive strategies that include the following representational skills: (a) appearance-reality distinction, (b) intentionality, (c) causal reasoning, (d) perspective-taking, and (e) recursive thinking.

While researchers in social cognition have long worked with these capabilities, my intent is to apply them to the socialization of emotion such that the case can be made that children themselves are the active "co-creators" of their beliefs about emotion in interpersonal contexts. If children are capable of these sorts of representational skills, then they also become capable of comprehending more complex social messages about how to manage emotional states and emotional-expressive behavior. It is in this sense that they become co-creators of their own beliefs about emotion experienced in social transactions.

I contend that such beliefs about emotion constitute naive theories of emotion (see Weiner, Folkes, Amirkhan, & Virette, 1987). A naive theory of emotion simply refers to the lay person's hypotheses (or assumptions) about how emotion works or functions. Lutz, an anthropologist, calls naive theories of emotion ethnotheories of emotion, and she defines them as "a fundamental ... aspect of psychosocial functioning... used to explain why, when, and how emotion occurs, and [ethnotheories of emotion are] embedded in more general theories of the person, internal processes, and social life" (1987, p. 291). If I may borrow a phrase from attachment research, a naive theory of emotion may be thought of as the "internal working model" used by an individual to make sense of emotion, particularly emotions experienced in interpersonal contexts. Thus, it is the naive or implicit theory of emotion held by an individual that becomes the target of inquiry when investigating how emotion is represented in age groups beyond early childhood. When one then adds to this

inquiry, how do such representations develop, we must then consider questions regarding the socialization of emotion, namely, what messages about emotion management are children assimilating. I am led to conclude that if one intends to conduct good developmental research on emotion, then the social context must be conceptually viewed as inseparable from emotional experience.

I will consider next a recent interview-based study with school-age children that will illustrate (a) their beliefs about emotion management that contribute to their preinteraction expectancies, (b) the sorts of socializing messages they appear to be responding to, and (c) the kinds of cognitive representations that are available to them as they construct their naive theory of emotion.

METHOD

Sample. The participants were 108 children in three age groups: 6-7 years, 8-9 years, and 10-11 years, relatively evenly distributed across gender and age groups. Socio-economic status ranged from lower- to upper-middle class; no children with special educational needs were included. All were residents of a Northern California small city and attended public school.

Stimulus materials. The children were individually asked a series of standardized questions about the parental reactions likely to occur when a child protagonist reveals his/her genuine emotion in a hypothetical vignette and what one could do to avoid or promote those parental reactions. We used 8 vignettes, which consisted of a verbal narrative and accompanying cartoon

pictures; they were presented in a random order for each child. Boys heard stories about sons with half having mothers present in the vignettes and half with fathers involved. Girls heard stories about daughters with again half involving mothers and the other half fathers.

These 8 vignettes were of two sorts: (1) 4 of them were about someone else at risk for having their feelings hurt by the protagonist expressing her or his real emotion (e.g., a child expresses disgust at Grandma's strange-looking casserole; these 4 are hereafter called the "vulnerable-other" stories), and (2) the remaining 4 vignettes were about the child protagonist her- or himself becoming vulnerable by displaying genuine emotion (e.g., a child cries after being threatened by a bully, hereafter called "vulnerable-child" stories). Table 1 contains a description of the themes of the 8 vignettes.

Insert Table 1 here

Interview. The children were individually interviewed and asked how the parent would react to the genuine display of emotion and how the child protagonist would subsequently feel about the parental response. For those children who thought the protagonist was unhappy about the parent reaction, a question was posed about what the protagonist could do differently to avoid such a negative outcome vis a vis their parent. All children were asked last what they themselves would do if they were personally in a similar situation.

RESULTS

Initially I evaluated the data as discrete categories by using chi-square analyses, but I recently recoded a number of the categories into dimensions that allowed me to convert children's responses into continuous data (omitting "don't know" and tangential responses) and use parametric analyses (see Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). The 4 dependent measures yielded by this conversion are as follows: (a) parent reaction (degree of control), (b) degree of parental support of the child, (c) degree of positivity in child's feeling in light of parent support (or lack thereof), and (d) likelihood of expected expression management if oneself were in the situation. The independent variables were age group by child sex by parent sex -- or a 3 x 2 x 2 design. Each of the 8 vignettes was analyzed separately.

The influence of target vulnerability. The most robust finding was that with but one exception, there were no age differences in children's expectations of how controlling or how accepting a parent's reaction would be in the two vulnerability conditions. Across age groups children generally selected relatively more controlling or restrictive parental reactions when the protagonist's display of genuine emotion would be likely to result in another person's becoming vulnerable or getting their feelings hurt (an average of 77% of the children anticipated controlling parental reactions across the 4 "vulnerable-other" vignettes). Only for the story about receiving an undesirable gift was there a significant age effect ($F(2,96) = 6.84$, $p<.002$): The youngest children were more likely

to expect some degree of parental acceptance than were the two older age groups.

More accepting and supportive parental reactions were generally expected in the "vulnerable-child" vignettes (an average of 69% of the children anticipated accepting parental reactions across the 4 "vulnerable-child" vignettes). There were no significant age effects. Thus, in terms of what children have learned about emotion management, they generally expect negative consequences for showing genuine feelings if doing so may contribute to another person feeling hurt. For oneself becoming vulnerable by expressing one's genuine emotions, the responses indicated that generally children believe that with parents one need not manage one's emotional display very much as the consequences are usually benign.

"Vulnerable-child" vignettes. In examining the 4 dependent variables derived from the children's interviews, age was a significant predictor for several outcomes in these "vulnerable-child" stories (getting an injection, making a mistake during a solo, losing one's pet bird through an open window, and being bullied). Relative to the youngest and oldest children, third graders reported that the child in the story felt significantly worse in the solo performance story ($F(2,96) = 4.55$, $p<.01$), and in contrast to the youngest children, the two older groups of children both thought the protagonist would feel worse in the lost bird story ($F(2,96) = 6.14$, $p<.003$). Older children also reported that parents were perceived as significantly less supportive toward the protagonist in these two vignettes,

contributing to the older child's expectation that the protagonist would experience greater negative affect as a result.

Parent sex was a significant factor by itself only in the solo performance story: fathers were thought to be more accepting of the protagonist's display of distress, particularly of daughters ($p<.09$). Parent sex did significantly interact with child sex such that fathers were perceived as more supportive toward girls whereas mothers were perceived as more supportive of sons, especially by the youngest boys, in the bully ($p<.02$) and lost bird ($p<.03$) stories.

For those children who gave a decidedly harsh parental response to this display of vulnerability-inducing genuine emotion (and they were a distinct minority, ranging across the 4 stories from 18 - 38% with an average of 26%), they were asked what could the story character do differently to avoid the parental lack of support in the vulnerability-inducing situation. All children were also asked what would they have done themselves in a similar situation. The pattern of significant age effects from these two questions was that, in general, older children were more likely to suggest changing the situation (e.g., shut the window so that the pet bird could not fly out), while younger children more often selected changing their expressive behavior. Thus, the belief espoused by younger children appeared to be, "don't show you feel upset," whereas older children seem to be prescribing prevention, "don't get into the vulnerable situation in the first place." Only the injection story elicited no significant age effects, although there was a steady increase

with age in children reporting that they would control their expressive behavior in this situation (over whose occurrence they have little control).

Only one significant child sex difference emerged, which was for the solo story, and has interesting implications for public performance. In response to the question about what would they do themselves in the story about making a mistake in a solo gymnastics performance, girls were more likely than boys, across age groups, to suggest changing how one looks; boys were more likely to contend that what they would do is to change how they feel.

Reciprocity expectancies. I do want to emphasize, however, that overall, children across age groups and gender expected more parental support and acceptance in these "vulnerable child" stories than in the "vulnerable-other" stories, and they felt better (i.e., less vulnerable) upon receiving that parent support. It is in this general pattern that the reciprocity expectancy shows itself: "if I feel vulnerable, but you respond comfortingly, then I'll feel better." Thus, a parent's acceptance of a child's genuine emotional display leads to a reciprocally positive response by the child.

Cognitive skills. In terms of the cognitive skills used in children's expectations in these "vulnerable-child" vignettes, I shall quote several children's comments and the questions they were responding to. In parentheses are examples of the kinds of cognitive capabilities demonstrated by the child's response.

Ques.: How does the child now feel (posed after eliciting the parent reaction to a boy expressing distress after he made a mistake during a solo gymnastics performance)?

6th grade boy: "He feels happy that his mom told him not to worry so he can go on and forget it." (Recursive thinking, perspective-taking.)

Ques.: What would you do yourself if this situation were to happen to you?

(Same boy): "I would kind of show how I feel and not show how I feel. I wouldn't feel really embarrassed because even professionals make mistakes." (Perspective-taking, causal thinking, appearance-reality distinction.)

Ques.: What would you do yourself if this situation were to happen to you? (In reference to the lost pet bird vignette.)

1st grade girl: "I'd feel sad because I like birds, and if my father told me not to get so upset, I'd feel real mad at him." (Causal thinking, perspective-taking.)

Ques.: How does the child now feel (posed after eliciting the parent reaction to the child's distress upon getting an injection)?

3rd grade girl: She'd feel happy that her father cares for her a lot." (Recursive thinking, perspective-taking.)

We see here examples of perspective-taking, causality, recursive thinking, and, more significantly, examples of reciprocity expectancies: How the parent responds emotionally (positively or negatively) is taken into account by the child, who reciprocates also in either a parallel negative way (e.g.,

'if father got upset at me, I'd get mad at him') or in a parallel positive way (e.g., the child feels happy <u>because</u> father cares for her.)

<u>"Vulnerable-other" vignettes</u>. In examining compensatory expectancies for how children anticipate the possible pattern of mutual influence between parent and child, the stories involving a "vulnerable-other" are a good source for illustration. In terms of statistical results, as mentioned above, what we found in terms of age effects was that in general children expect controlling reactions from their parents when they express genuine feelings that might contribute to someone else feeling badly, with the one exception being the youngest children believing there will be greater parental acceptance or tolerance of the genuine emotional display of irritation at being given an undesirable gift.

Sex differences appeared in several ways, but not in all stories. Girls expected significantly more parental acceptance of genuine emotion in the unwanted gift and funeral stories ($F(1,96) = 6.84$, $p<.01$ and $F(1,96) = 4.54$, $p<.04$, respectively). They also anticipated that fathers would be significantly more accepting of daughters' giggling during a funeral and more supportive of them when staring at an accident victim. What is important to note here is the <u>contextualization</u> of these sex differences patterns: they did not occur across all vignettes, but the cross-sex perception of acceptance or support of genuine emotion does echo the similar findings for a couple of the "vulnerable-child" stories.

When asked what would they do themselves if they were in the situations reflected in the 4 "vulnerable-other" stories, significant age effects occurred for the funeral and disgusting food situations. For the disgusting food situation the oldest children were twice as likely to endorse changing one's expression rather than changing the situation (e.g., "eat it without making a fuss about it" versus "you could feed it to the dog under the table"). For the giggling-at-a-funeral story, the significant age effect was due to a disproportionate group of third-graders (particularly boys), who were more likely to insist that they would always feel sad in a funeral, thus behaving according to how they felt, and therefore situational and expressive strategies were less often mentioned as relevant for coping with not-sad feelings during a funeral ceremony.

Cognitive skills. I shall quote again several children's responses to assorted interview questions as a way to illustrate the sort of sophisticated cognitive skills used by the children. Their thinking also demonstrates how they attempt to respond to anticipated problematic interactions and produce compensatory expectancies. I have italicized those comments that suggest compensatory strategies.

Ques.: How did the mother feel toward the boy when she reacted that way? (In reference to the giggling displayed at a funeral.)

6th grade boy: "She felt angry, but ***didn't really want to let it out, because the people might get more upset*** around them." (Recursive thinking, perspective-taking, causal reasoning, appearance-reality distinction, intentionality.)

Ques.: How does the boy now feel? (Posed after eliciting the preceding response.)

(Same boy): "He felt ashamed because he did something wrong." (Causal thinking, perspective-taking.)

Ques.: What could he do differently so that his mother wouldn't feel that way about him? (Posed after eliciting the preceding response.)

(Same boy): "He could ***hold in the giggle*** and laugh inside himself." (Perspective-taking, appearance-reality distinction, implicit recursive thinking: 'so that she would not get angry at him'.)

Ques.: What would you do yourself if this situation were to happen to you?

(Same boy): "I'd walk over away from Mom, like walk over to a tree, ***turn away, and then giggle*** if I really had to." (Perspective-taking, implicit recursive thinking.)

Ques.: How did the mother feel when she reacted that way to the girl? (In reference to the story about staring intently at an accident victim.)

6th grade girl: "She'd be kind of upset because she [the daughter] is staring at the man who can't help it [how he looks]." (Causal reasoning, perspective-taking.)

Ques.: How does the girl now feel?

(Same girl): "She's feeling embarrassed that she was staring; she felt sad for the man." (Recursive thinking, perspective-taking.)

Ques.: What could the girl do differently so that her mother wouldn't feel that way about her?

(Same girl): "She ***could not stare, stay normal-looking; just glance once, so the victim wouldn't be ashamed.***" (Perspective-taking, causal reasoning, appearance-reality distinction, recursive thinking.)

Ques.: What would you do yourself if this situation were to happen to you?

(Same girl): "I'd feel ashamed if I was staring at a poor man. Next time I'd ***try hard not to stare***, even if I wanted to." (Perspective-taking, implied appearance-reality distinction, intentionality.)

Ques.: How did the mother feel when she reacted that way to the boy? (In reference to the boy expressing disgust at Grandmother's strange-looking casserole.)

1st grade boy: "She was mad at him, and she didn't want to cook something else just for him." (Perspective-taking.)

Ques.: How does the boy now feel?

(Same 1st grade boy): "He's mad at his mom." (Perspective-taking. Note: Reciprocity, rather than compensation, is evident here in this relatively young child's thinking: He reciprocates anger for anger.)

Ques.: What could the boy do differently so that his mother wouldn't feel that way about him?

(Same boy): "***Don't say 'yech'*** at Grandma's food." (Implicit causal reasoning.)

Ques.: What would you do yourself if this situation were to happen to you?

(Same boy): "I would ***act alright*** and say, 'Please don't cook that again.'" (Perspective-taking, possible appearance-reality distinction.)

I deliberately took two children from the oldest age group and one from the youngest as the older children's responses appeared more suggestive of the kinds of cognitive capabilities needed in children's thinking for them to be able to conceptualize compensatory strategies. Recursive thinking is especially important for being able to anticipate another's reaction, particularly an internal state reaction, to one's own response. To be able to consider compensatory strategies, children need to be able to view social exchanges as interactional systems that are also subject to temporal sequences: who did what first and what is likely to happen next if one does not intervene strategically.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data presented here are descriptive and hopefully also persuasive in supporting my view that children participate in their own socialization of emotion management. Children "co-create" their beliefs and expectations about emotion by developing cognitive capabilities that permit them both to comprehend more complex messages from others about emotion and, more importantly, to view social interaction from a systems perspective that emphasizes mutual influence. It is the mutual influence of one another's emotional states and expressive behaviors in interpersonal contexts that is of central importance here, for it is that dynamic process that, when combined with

emerging cognitive skills, facilitates the child's development of an implicit theory of emotion that is sufficiently complex for her or him to function in an emotionally competent fashion. As I have argued elsewhere, emotional competence is inseparably linked with social self-efficacy (Saarni, 1989). To the degree that one's naive or implicit theory of emotion is differentiated, then similarly one's emotional transactions with others can be skillfully and sensitively negotiated.

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TABLE 1

Story Themes

Note: All eight stories feature a parent present. In the accompanying stick-figure cartoons, the parent's facial expression has been left blank, and other people present have either neutral expressions or expressions appropriate to the occasion (e.g., sad expressions at a funeral). The child-protagonist's facial expression is clearly displayed and the narrative states explicitly how the child felt.

"Vulnerable-Other" Vignettes

1. Gift: Child-protagonist displays an irritated frown upon receiving used records as a birthday gift from her/his grandfather.

2. Victim: Child-protagonist stares with curiosity at an accident victim; her/his facial expression shows a slight smile and wide-open eyes directed toward the accident victim.

3. Casserole: Child-protagonist says "yech" and looks disgusted upon being offered some of Grandmother's peculiar-looking casserole.

4. Funeral: Child-protagonist giggles with a smiling face while attending a funeral procession.

"Vulnerable-Child" Vignettes

1. Bully: Child-protagonist arrives at the front door of her/his home looking very upset and fearful. S/he reports to the parent that a bully has been threatening her/him.

2. Injection: Child-protagonist displays distress as s/he is about to receive an injection from a doctor.

3. Solo: Child-protagonist displays distress upon making a mistake in a solo gymnastics performance. The parent is part of the audience.

4. Bird: Child-protagonist looks sad as parent encounters her/him just after her/his pet bird has escaped through an open window.